

Tribute to Martha

Jan 15, 2024

Martha Saxton died on July 18, 2023 at the age of 77. In the twenty years she taught at Amherst College, Martha left a deep mark on the curriculum, students, faculty, staff, and our understanding of the college's history. She provided a model on how to be both meticulous and audacious.

Martha's career took an unusual trajectory in the years leading up to that arrival – as it continued to do throughout her time here. Having received a B.A. in History from the University of Chicago in 1967, she proceeded to build a career as a freelance writer for several decades. Her first book, published in 1976, was a biography of the 1950s actress Jayne Mansfield. If Mansfield emerged in that text as something less than tragic, she also seemed to Martha to deserve the sort of serious treatment that made the movie star's life a story capable of telling us something important about the world we – and especially the women among us – live in.

In 1977 she published another biography, this time of Louisa May Alcott, the renowned 19th century author of *Little Women* and many other books. In it, Martha's genius for connecting the inner life of women to the societies in which they negotiate their lives gained even greater traction. Here, moreover, her training as a historian showed more clearly in the depth and breadth of the research she conducted into Alcott's life and times. More importantly, she demonstrated the historian's commitment to rendering the past -- as much as possible – as it was and not as the writer wished it to be. Her young Louisa May is a woman unfit for limitations of Victorian womanhood, but determined in her adulthood to justify its ways to her fellow citizens.

Within a few years of its publication, Martha enrolled in the Ph.D. program in History at Columbia, and earned her doctorate in 1989. Working under Eric Foner, one of the most eminent historians of his generation, Martha took on a subject of great originality, one that guaranteed that her mentor, for all his prodigious scholarly virtues, would be observing, as much as directing, her progress. As in all things, Martha was her own woman. The book that eventuated from the dissertation, *Being Good: Women's Moral Values in Early America*, published in 2003, is almost uncategorizable. It asked a question that would have been difficult to answer in any one time or place – “How did American women think about trying to live a good life?” – and proposed to explore it in three quite disparate settings: 17th century Puritan New England; 18th century tidewater Virginia; and 19th century St. Louis.

Being Good is a masterpiece of archival research and of complex analysis that contains scores of powerful insights into women's lives. One of its reviewers called it “a work of literature, which is to say, of nuanced passion, wisdom, and revelation.” It is also the work of a public intellectual, one who speaks at all times to all women and to all citizens. This same reviewer wrote that this book's significance was for an audience beyond the academy: “If you have an interest in the subject of the American woman – or if you are simply an American woman interested in knowing how you got to be who you are – read it.”

In the late 1990s, Martha began collaborating with Frank Couvares on a major revision of the classic work of historiography, *Interpretations of American History*, which had gone through six

editions under its founding authors. Frank described Martha as the ideal scholarly partner in such an enterprise: hard-working, cool-headed, and utterly without self-importance, but sure of what she knows and ready to merge that with what her partner knows in such a way as to make the final product a true collaboration.

With visiting artist Wendy Ewald, fellow artist Faizal Sheikh, and human rights activist Thomas Keenan, Martha produced a book called *The Transformation of This World Depends on You*. Based on research in the Amherst College archives, and using photographs, etchings, letters, and other documents, they traced the lives of nine students who, in the late nineteenth century, became missionaries to Asia and the Pacific. Such an inventive cross-disciplinary venture could not have been conceived but for Martha's imagination and ambition.

Martha remained extraordinarily productive after her retirement from Amherst College. She edited the magisterial bicentennial volume, *Amherst in the World*, to which she contributed a chapter on co-education at Amherst College. She published a much acclaimed biography, *The Widow Washington: The Life of Mary Washington* (2019) in which she wrote, "I have spent my life studying and writing North American women's history to try to retrieve some of what has been lost, to try to replace incomprehension or criticism with historical context, and to substitute evidence for stereotypes and sentiment." At the time of her death, she had almost completed a biography of the 18th-century English historian Edward Gibbon which will be published posthumously.

Martha taught an extraordinary range of courses at Amherst in the History and Sexuality, Women's and Gender Studies departments. Her courses concerned the lives of women of color, particularly enslaved and incarcerated women in 19th century America. They reflected her passionate commitment to feminism and social justice.

This exacting historian was audacious in what she taught and how she taught. In one memorable course, she asked students to rewrite Wikipedia entries to provide more extensive and accurate renderings of women's history. Amrita Basu co-taught with Martha courses on Gender and the Environment and on Human Rights Activism. Martha's knowledge of the field and its practitioners, some of whom she brought to campus, was formidable. It was from Martha that Amrita learned about the history of human rights and its immeasurable if contested applications.

Michele Barale, who taught an introductory course in Women and Gender Studies Martha recalls,

What I can offer is Martha's patience and generosity in the classroom. She did not speed across, or ignore material in order to keep to her syllabus. If she felt that a topic had not been really gotten at, she would push, question further, probe the class as to why they wanted to pass shallowly over a subject. She was never aggressive in doing this. Just patient. If the class clearly was unable to pursue the matter more fully, she would talk about it herself for a while to see if this would get things moving. She honored her students' struggles with an idea. It wasn't just the usual "no question is dumb" stuff, but she was often able to take the seemingly foolish or mis-directed interest of a question and turn it a few degrees in another direction so

that it revealed something more. And she was creative/daring in her choices of texts. ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’—which David Blight I believe said he was terrified of teaching. ‘Little Men’ — such an unflavored book for Alcott fans. But what else might we expect from an historian who wrote a book about Jane Mansfield (not Marilyn Monroe) and not George but Martha Washington. Martha’s perspective was unusual, on a slant, offering surprise.

In the wake of turmoil around sexual assault on campus, Martha and Wendy Ewald co-taught a seminar entitled *Representing Equality* and together with their students, published *A Sex and Education Handbook: By and for Amherst College Students* to help incoming students address the gender inequalities that result in sexual violence.

Martha’s greatest, most fulfilling experiences, were teaching courses at the Hampshire County Jail and Correctional Facility for “inside” (incarcerated) and “outside” (Amherst College) students. In a moving article that Martha published on this experience she wrote,

At its best, an Inside/Out human rights class can be a semester long process of radicalizing students. At a minimum, it humanizes incarcerated students and their college classmates. Diminished fear permits learning of many kinds. Some outside students get their first deep lungful of the fetid air of inequality. For a few, this will mean activism. Realistically, it is probably also for a few a form of tourism. In between those poles, many positive changes can happen.

Numerous inside –namely Amherst College--students felt that their course with Martha at the jail changed their lives. One of them, in celebrating Martha’s retirement from the college in 2016, wrote:

My experience in Perspectives on Economy and Criminal Justice, which took place inside the Hampshire County Jail, was truly transformative. I've brought up the course at almost every job interview I've had, because no other class at Amherst has had such a lasting impression on me. I am now in my final year of law school at Yale and will be pursuing a career as a public defender, in part because of your class. I am really grateful for the experience...

Students were also inspired by Martha’s ability to engage deeply with the college while remaining her own woman. One student wrote,

You were different. You seemed independent of the institution, somehow separate and above any intellectual or customary constraints. And, without apology, you were about justice.

This student continued,

What I started to see in 2010 bloomed fully for me two years later when my actions started to mimic yours, albeit in a different realm. I no longer just thought about justice on a grand scale or in a historical perspective, but I with others began acting it out on the small, campus-student and campus-administrative scale. What I cared about in history became a lived experience.

Given the respect Martha commanded among the faculty, it is not surprising that she served on some of the most important college committees—mostly notably on the Special Committee on Amherst Education and twice on the Committee of Six. A citation by colleagues to mark Martha’s retirement described her as “worldly, grounded, compassionate, irreverent, modest, witty, soft spoken, outspoken, rebellious, diplomatic, audacious, and wise.”

We loved Martha for all these qualities and more— for her ability to traverse intellectual and geographic boundaries; for her courage in speaking out when it was hardest and mattered most; for the depth, clarity, and honesty of her psychological insights; and for her grace and fortitude in confronting daunting challenges in her personal life and in the political world which she cared so deeply about.

President Elliott, I move that this memorial minute be adopted by the faculty in a rising vote of silence and entered into the records of the college, and that a copy be sent to Martha’s family.

Respectfully submitted,

Michèle Barale
Amrita Basu
Frank Couvares
Frederick Griffiths